

Big question: what is prayer like?

Why do some people pray every day, and others never?



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Read and discuss Anne Lewin's poem with pupils. Many young people form the idea that prayer is like going shopping with a list: you ask God for things, and if they are in stock, you may be lucky enough to get them. But the poem seems to be about prayer in a very different way to this. What do the pupils think it means? Do they agree with the idea in the poem, that prayer's meaning is a bit like birdwatching?

Primary and secondary RE can both use the theme of prayer effectively to raise and explore big theological and spiritual ideas. Pupils across all ages are often familiar with the idea of prayer, and many pray themselves. Surveys of 14-year-old pupils reveal that around 85 per cent pray either 'often' or 'sometimes'. This is a far higher response rate than surveys get for church attendance.

Is it perhaps the case that when RE approaches prayer, it is sometimes the externals of posture, ritual and artefacts that children learn about, but not the experience of prayer in the life of faith? This is not good practice.

Here then are some simple ideas for classroom activities that can use some of the prayers from different world faiths. The activities are deliberately adaptable to use with different age groups. In all these suggestions, it is good to make it very clear to pupils that they are being asked to learn about prayer in the classroom, but they are emphatically not being asked to pray themselves. This itself is a teaching point about the aims and purposes of RE.

1 Can you tell which religion goes with which prayer? Take a number of prayers (six or twelve?) and ask pupils to work out which religious tradition they come from. This is maybe best done with six each from two religions, rather than two each from six religions. What does the activity say about the pupils' knowledge, and about the particular vision of each religion studied? Are some prayers a 'good fit' with more than one religion?

2 Can you simplify a hard prayer by rewriting for younger children? Take one prayer, the language of which is complex. Ask pupils in pairs to rewrite the prayer for an audience three years younger than themselves. This will expose the points that they understand, and where they have difficulty – a good bit of diagnostic assessment. This works well with the Lord's Prayer. Or try the Shahadah, or the Shema.

3 What's it saying? Give pupils a number of the prayers, say ten, and ask them to sum up in a single sentence what each one is about, what each is saying to God. A simple activity that has hidden depths. Can they work out the context? Is one of these a prayer for a wedding? A new baby? To say when you are in

trouble? At new year? In worship? In weakness? Ask pupils to select or sort prayers for particular occasions: a Muslim funeral, a Christian initiation, a Jewish thanksgiving, a Hindu morning prayer, and so on. Develop in discussion that prayer is as varied and specific to needs and contexts as any human conversation.

4 Not science fiction – prayer fiction. Can pupils write a story with a prayer in it? There are good links to literacy here. Get pupils to write a story in which someone says a prayer. The story should be in three chapters. The first chapter sets up a situation that leads someone to pray. The second section is the prayer. The third is about what happens next. Did the prayer have any impact or make any difference? How and why, or why not? This will give pupils a chance to write about the effects of prayer as they see them, in the life of the character in their story. Does God answer? Is prayer helpful? This activity had, for me, surprisingly open and creative results for 11-year-olds.

5 What are the main kinds of prayers? List the different types of prayer that are used in one faith, or in several:

- giving thanks
- adoring God
- meditation
- lament
- prayer for forgiveness
- prayer for others
- prayer for myself

Ask pupils to find one example of each, and to work on these to understand what the believer is asking for, or saying in prayer. Wonderful examples can of course be found in Judeo-Christian scripture in the Psalms.

6 Liturgical prayer: is it better than spontaneous prayer? Why, or why not? Teach pupils about congregational and responsive prayer in different traditions, and ask them to analyse in pairs some responsive prayers for particular occasions or on particular themes. You may like the formula 'Write a prayer or meditation ...' as you set the task, giving some choice. Is it always coercive to require a class to write prayers? It is certainly best avoided.

7 Should school prayer be banned, as it is in the USA? Share with pupils the issues that make collective worship controversial, and discuss whether schools should pray together, or offer opportunities for prayer. If so, to whom should prayer be offered? Ask pupils to write prayers, meditations or reflections for assembly in which some, many, most or all could participate. Ask pupils to choose from a collection the prayers that could be appropriate for use in a school – or the most inappropriate! Get them to note that introducing prayer needs a formula such as 'Here's a prayer from the Christian/Jewish/Hindu faith. Please listen, and if you want to you can join in with the "amen", or 'I'm going to say a prayer now, written by a Year Six pupil. You can listen, or if you like to pray yourself you can join in.'

8 Is meditation similar to or different from prayer? Some faith traditions use meditation much more than prayer. Discuss this distinction with pupils, and look at examples of mantras, or other

standard practices for contemplation or meditation. Ask 'What words would you like to remember every day yourself? If you could suggest a meditation for your family, the whole class, the school or even the whole human race, what would you choose?' Get pupils to develop some of these, and share them. Look at examples from Buddhism, Hindu traditions or Christian forms – try the Benedictines. These are stimulating examples.

9 Do you ever invite pupils to write their own prayers? I think it is good practice to give pupils an option about writing prayers, with an alternative of poetry, meditation, reflection or some other creative writing, but my experience is that a big majority, sometimes all of a class, find it interesting and creative to write prayers. Some agnostic or atheist young people choose to join in, and practice the empathetic skills in this way. Some write angry or argumentative prayer: 'God, if you did exist, then wouldn't you

think ...?' Would you ask pupils to write prayers for themselves on a range of personal issues like bullying, self-discipline, friendships, fears, love, alcohol and drugs, family life, money and generosity, hatred or loneliness? Might you ask for prayers on social issues, such as peace and conflict, the value of life, the environment, the human use of animals, racism, community, justice, gender issues, world inequality and poverty or sexism? Would you focus on doubts and

questions? Ask pupils: if they could ask God any questions, what they would ask? Get them to explore their doubts and questions through writing prayers, or perhaps dialogues with God.

Teacher discussion agenda:

- Do you use the theme of prayer in RE? Why, or why not? What works? What are the problems?
- What do you like, and what do you dislike, about the ideas given here?
- Will you try any of them? How, and who with?
- How can professional RE avoid any sense of participation or coercion in asking pupils to study this topic? Bad RE says 'We're all going to try a bit of Buddhist meditation now' or 'Everyone, I want you to write a prayer to God today.'
- What else do you want to say about this topic?

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'Disclosure' by Ann Lewin

*Prayer is like watching for the Kingfisher.
All you can do is
Be where he is likely to appear, and
Wait.
Often, nothing much happens;
There is space, silence and
Expectancy.
No visible sign, only the
Knowledge that he's been there
And may come again.
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But when you've almost stopped
Expecting it, a flash of brightness
Gives encouragement.*

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